

## Article

# The Double Character of Cuban Protestantism and Philanthropy

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**Abstract:** In Cuba and the United States, Protestant institutions exist that are both reflective and nonreflective about their culture's influence on belief and practice. The case of Cuba sheds light on how Christian churches and voluntary associations operate in an authoritarian regime. Despite the tension and enmity that have typified Cuba's geopolitical relationship with the United States since the colonial days, cross-cultural Christian philanthropic partnerships exist. The “doble carácter” (double character) of Cuban Protestant churches has grown out of both collaboration with, and resistance to U.S.-style evangelicalism (Arce Valentín 2016). Adaptations of liberation theology, adopted among Cuban Christians, provide an influential counterweight to the mighty Western theological and philanthropic tradition (González 2012). The nature of this engagement influences Cuban civil society, the survival of the Cuban regime, and provides an extreme case for cross-cultural philanthropy worldwide. This socio-historical account utilizes the data collected from personal interviews with Cuban Protestant leaders, primary sources found in the library at the San Cristobal Presbyterian Seminary and Cuban theological journals, and a qualitative analysis of literature on Cuba, Protestants, missions, philanthropy, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and civil society.

**Keywords:** philanthropy; world Christianity; globalization; civil society; evangelicalism; liberation theology

## 1. Introduction

Pastor Ernesto Ortega and Professor David Montegro are Protestant theological leaders in Cuba. Mr. Ortega leads a Christian civil society organization called Pueblo de Esperanza on the outskirts of Havana, operating both nonprofit and for-profit activities, which generate income that is funneled through a foundation in Spain to avoid the embargo. Over the past 20 years, Pueblo de Esperanza has multiplied from two to more than 120 house churches and added community activities such as health clinics and baseball clubs. The organization welcomes more than 300 American visitors each year. Its philanthropic systems are a microcosm of Cuban religious culture, ranging from church members donating portions of their ration cards as a tithe, to the acquisition of an abandoned government hospital from the Cuban government in exchange for American food products.

One hundred kilometers away in San Cristobal, David Montegro is one of the leading professors at The Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Mr. Montegro's father disappeared mysteriously when Montegro was 15, never to return. As a young man in a Baptist church while the Revolution was brewing, his views on faith were shaped primarily by his pastor, also Fidel Castro's treasurer. Montegro voices concerns about the emergence of classes in Cuba and the ongoing consequences of American-style capitalism in Cuban churches. Yet he has traveled to other countries to receive donations in cash for philanthropic projects (Goodwin 2017). His theology is ecumenical, which he deems to be crucial in Cuba's sociopolitical environment, and the seminary regularly convenes Christians of many denominations from across the globe.

Ortega and Montegro demonstrate the “doble carácter” of Cuban Protestant churches, both fiercely independent and also formed by foreign religious generosity and influence. This tension persists from colonial days. Father Félix Varela, Cuban Catholic priest and social activist, resisted the philanthropy associated with colonialism, claiming it was born out of the same self-interest as the previous cruelties of slavery. “Englishmen, on your lips the word philanthropy loses its value: excuse the expression, you are bad apostles of humanity.” (Corwin 2014, p. 28). U.S. and Cuban Protestant churches have held competing logics of evangelicalism and liberation throughout their collaborative history; while concurrent state and market influences heighten the need for discretion in U.S. philanthropic engagement with Cuba.

## 2. Key Definitions

The following terms are central to understanding the cross-cultural, faith-based relationships between the United States and Cuba. While all these terms have long histories and debates, the definitions below represent an accurate description of their intended meaning in this article.

- **Philanthropy** describes private action intended for the public good (Sulek 2010).
- **World Christianity** refers to the social phenomenon of the Christian religion worldwide, with a specific emphasis on those aspects which are considered non-Western. Sanneh differentiates this from global Christianity, which mimics previous religious establishments and cultures (Sanneh 2003).
- **Globalization** is the growing interaction of people, countries, and groups because of international flows of ideas, money and culture (Steger 2017).
- **Civil Society** is a debated concept. The United Nations defines it as the third-sector of society, along with government and business. In democracies, civil society consists of nonprofit and nongovernment organizations and institutions (Crahan and Armony 2007).
- **Missiology**: the study of the church’s mission, especially with respect to missionary activity (Robert 1994).
- **Evangelicalism**: Understood through the lens of theology and practice versus culture or politics, evangelicals are adherents to the Christian faith who emphasize a regard for the Bible, believe that lives ought to be changed through conversion, stress activism and personal effort, and who center their faith on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (Bebbington 2003).
- **Liberation Theology**: Originally, this was a Catholic ideology that emphasizes God’s preference for the poor, and social justice (Barger 2018).

## 3. Modern-Day Cuba

Home to more than 11 million people, Cuba is one of the remaining Communist countries in the world, and one of the few to retain a state-controlled economy. Life and work in Cuba is unique compared to most other countries in the Western Hemisphere, with most employees earning 5% of the revenue generated by their labor. The average monthly salary for a full-time employee in Cuba is around \$30 U.S. The government of Cuba provides ration cards for citizens to redeem in exchange for food and other necessities, and health care is also provided by the state. Fidel Castro’s death on 25 November 2016 at the age of 90, ended the life of the longest direct and continual reign by one individual in the modern history of the world, nearly 50 years (Whitehead and Hoffmann 2016).

Though former United States President Barack Obama restored diplomacy between the countries in December of 2014, in June of 2017 U.S. President Donald Trump repealed some of the former agreement, limiting the interaction between the two nations. Recent accusations of sonic attacks against U.S. diplomats stationed in Havana have further escalated tensions (Chairman Royce Statement on New Cuba Policy. n.d). Central to this study is the support for the right of associationalism in Cuba. As former President Obama stated, “The promotion of democracy supports universal human rights by empowering civil society and a person’s right to speak freely, peacefully assemble, and associate,

and by supporting the ability of people to freely determine their future” ([Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes 2014](#)).

#### 4. Cuban Civil Society

Cuba freed itself from Spanish rule nearly 100 years after its Latin American counterparts in 1898. That freedom was also conditional, however, in that the United States had such strategic interests in Cuba, that it negotiated the Platt Amendment, compromising the sovereignty of the nation. The U.S. government’s attention brought incredible amounts of press coverage which influenced popular thought about Cuba in the U.S. In effect, waves of Protestant missionaries came to Cuba en masse ([Yaremko 1997](#)). The combination of interventionist state policies, powerful corporate interests, and arguably paternalistic missionary approaches, produced varied results in Cuba, including both dependency and “cubanismo”, an overt sense of nationalism ([Ayegboyin and Adebo 2016](#)).

Today, NGOs and civil society in Cuba are growing, but the government sees them as a way to obtain precious funding for its purposes, and not as a tool to develop interdependence amongst the people. The state deems these groups as socialist, utilizing them in pursuit of the political aims of the country. Cuba officially redefined the term civil society, in fact, claiming that it is an intermediary step in the pursuit of socialist society ([Hart 1996](#)).

Donations, especially from international partners, are closely monitored by the government, and must be formally recognized. Avoiding this requirement will cause the donor to be classified under “imperialism” that “attempts to introduce chaos in the Cuban Revolution by stimulating direct relationship with certain individuals, promoting organizational models alien to our political system, and unbalancing the democratic working of our society” ([Quiroz 2003](#), p. 66).

Cubanismo, or Cuba’s self-perception, extends to religious associations as well. Like other Latin American countries, Catholicism has permeated Cuban culture and molded attitudes nationwide. Unlike other Latin American countries, Cuba has been a nexus of world trade, with many visitors present, such as Europeans, Africans, Chinese, and North Americans, and religious minorities such as Sephardic Jews. Being an island, however, it did not interact with other Latin American colonies as much as others. In effect, Cuban’s belief systems and practices are both flexible and permeable. Institutions mean less to them than their Latin American counterparts. Because of the consistent theme of struggle in their nation’s history, religious revolutionary heroes and symbols may possess greater meanings ([Crahan et al. 2003](#)).

Throughout their history, it has been religious leaders who have challenged both political and religious institutions, and who have championed independence. In the early 19th century, Father Felix Varela and others were exiled for promoting independence, the abolition of slavery, and a participatory form of government. Varela’s ideas influenced one of Latin America’s greatest independence leaders, José Martí, along with a generation of anti-establishment Christians ([Crahan 2002](#)).

Religion is a key aspect of the ground-level development of Cuban civil society. Simultaneously, the Cuban state attempts to control much of the country’s religious beliefs, practice, and assembly. ([Freedom in the World: Cuba 2018](#)). In the case of Cuba, the Cuban state has either repressed or co-opted religious groups as a key tactic to its survival. Yet, Protestantism has strengthened since the 1990s. “Protestant growth began to skyrocket in terms of formal membership, numbers of worshippers, and places of worship” ([Goldenziel 2009](#)).

Crahan and Armony state that not only Christians, but a wide variety of Cuban religious groups make up the most broad-based subsector with a national reach. “A better understanding of the role of religions, past and present, in the context of the evolution of Cuban civil society can help establish the dynamics of citizen participation, nuances in the relationship between state and society and to some extent the future of Cuban civil society” ([Crahan and Armony 2007](#), p. 140).

## 5. U.S./Cuba Relations

Intense relations between Cuba and the United States is nothing new. From before the turn of the 19th century, the United States has maintained a strategic interest in the welfare of their island neighbor, Cuba. John Quincy Adams saw Cuba and Puerto Rico as “natural appendages” to the new nation, later writing to the U.S. ambassador to Spain that, “the annexation of Cuba to our federal republic will be indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself” (Schoultz 2009). Other presidents, such as Thomas Jefferson, also repeatedly expressed their desire to add Cuba to the Union (Schoultz 2009).

The U.S. helped Cuba to win its independence in the Spanish-American War in the late 1800s, afterwards mandating the Platt Amendment, which gave the U.S. the right to overrule Cuba’s national sovereignty (Gott 2005). Business and citizen groups, taking cues from the U.S. government, provided help for a generation of Cubans. This American help, however, exhibited paternalism in all sectors, including religious ones (Leimdorfer 2003).

## 6. Religious Philanthropy in the Platt Amendment Era

In the late 1800s, U.S. evangelicals who had experienced the success of the movement were eager to share their ideals with other countries. U.S. Christians felt an obligation to rescue those in need, both at home and abroad. Press coverage of the war in 1898 stimulated increased interest in Protestant missions in Cuba. North American Protestants sent an increasing number of missionaries to the country, especially Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. “The image projected by the press and politicians was of a benevolent US sacrificing its soldiers for the good of all Cubans.” (Leimdorfer 2003, p. 69).

As Military Governor Leonard Wood explained in 1900, “We are dealing with a race that has steadily been going down for a hundred years, and into which we have to infuse new life, new principles, and new methods of doing things” (Pérez 2012, p. 159).

Baptist writer Howard Grose agreed, saying, “There must be a deal of uplifting, of change, of improvement. The moral standards must be raised, and new ideals must be introduced. The Cuban people have generations of bad training and no training to outgrow, new habits to form, new customs to adopt, before they can reach the condition of civilization which they ought to have” (Pérez 2012, p. 249).

The popularity of the Cuban mission caused one observer in 1899 to note, “the country had been overrun by Americans during the last 70 years. They had introduced every form of Protestantism, including Episcopalians and Quakers, and even Shakers” (Gott 2005, p. 68). Unlike the rest of Latin America, the Protestant movement before the Spanish-American War was led by Cuban ministers or Cuban patriots, as the Presbyterian minister and Cuban historian Rafael Cepeda called them (Fernández Albán 2015). Cuban leaders were grateful for the financial support and building of religious institutional capacity. They valued the ideas of liberal democracy and civic participation. Yet, missionaries also assumed that their system was superior—“politically, socially, economically and religiously” (Leimdorfer 2003). As was characteristic of American evangelical philanthropy, the U.S. missionaries by and large did not reflect on the overlapping influences inherent in their work alongside the Cubans. For example, funding for U.S. missionaries came from mission boards and also from U.S. corporations. These missions and schools provided English-speaking employees for the companies, who were accustomed to American culture (Leimdorfer 2003).

At the same time, Cuban nationalism was also growing. From the high echelons of society to the common rural farmers, social protest and anti-American sentiment was on the rise. Even the first Cuban President, Tomás Estrada Palma, was chagrined over the Platt Amendment. Yet he also felt that Cuba owed allegiance to the U.S. because of their effort in the war. He was further beholden to U.S. Protestant interests having spent years living with a Quaker family and serving as administrator in a Quaker school.

U.S. capital was soon responsible for two thirds of the country’s sugar production. Self-sufficient farmers in Eastern Cuba, where one half of the country’s sugar was produced, lost access to their local market. They were reorganized as workers in the larger foreign-owned mills, and bought their

food from the company store. In short, the U.S.' benevolent intervention in Cuban affairs in actuality, "deprived Cubans of their rights to sovereignty and self-determination" (Leimdorfer 2003, p. 69). Their independence existed only in so far as it accommodated the U.S. interests. This, Pérez suggests, led over time to considerable backlash against the foreign presence in Cuba (Pérez 2012; Leimdorfer 2003).

These complexities were inherent in the Cuban Protestant communities of the day, creating what Cuban religious scholar Reinerio Arce Valentín calls a "doble carácter", or double character. These doble carácter churches reflected more than a dichotomy, they represented the vast cultural menus of the two countries from which Cuban churches developed their institutions (Chen and O'Mahony 2006; Ortega 1995; Arce Valentín 2016). In general, most Cuban Protestant churches embraced the ideas of liberal democracy, and of civic participation. The Cubans were less interested, based on their culture, of the intense bent toward the productivity and capitalist logic of their northern neighbors. These varying institutional logics, values, and practices were integrated through selective synthesis. Selective synthesis is a normal process for organizations aiming to create social and personal change, especially when the organizations seek to create cohesion across great cultural differences, rely upon volunteers, and make decisions collectively. Members select from a wide variety of organizing choices and dueling criteria. These conditions are inherent to the process of creating new organizational forms, even while they intensify the dilemmas of organizing (Chen and O'Mahony 2006).

Missionaries who travel to Cuba since the 19th century have been primarily Americans. Most often they were Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, groups that at the time would have been considered evangelicals. Representing a variety of denominations, evangelicals are known for their reliance on the Bible as the ultimate authority for religion, emphasis on conversion or new birth, social activism and a sense of personal duty, and finally crucicentrism, which is "a focus on Christ's redeeming work as the heart of true religion" (Bebbington 2003; Noll 2007, p. 6). In the United States, evangelicals, including their churches and organizations, descended from the Great Awakening, a religious movement of the 18th century led by George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards. Denominations, then, are less important for evangelicals than personal conviction that is based on these four principles. According to this definition, today, many groups would identify as evangelicals, including African-American Protestants, Quakers, Mennonites, and many Roman Catholics (Noll 2007).

The Great Awakening, which began in the 1730s, also changed church membership. Many new voluntarily-supported congregations formed, while tax-supported churches sought to suppress the movement, often with beatings and imprisonment of fledgling groups such as Baptists (Hammack 1998). The subsequent separation of church and state forced Americans to reconsider their dealings with the public, be it religion, business, or politics, as an issue of personal conviction and choice.

The protection afforded by the religious disestablishment clause encouraged a complex network of churches and voluntary organizations. "It is not enough to say of churches and colleges that they contribute to the welfare of a State: they are necessary to the existence of a free State. They form and mold the public character . . . " Hall went on to call their influence regarding socially-minded and charitable activities of the day as "astonishing." By the 1850s, the networks of churches had created a culture of organization and a popular mindset that made collective action a norm, or as Hall describes them, "a subgroup of individuals with an unusual proclivity for corporate activity and voluntary action" (Hall 2001, p. 33). Swiss theologian and historian Philip Schaff described this group in the 1850s, stating, "The genuine American despises nothing more than idleness and stagnation; he regards not enjoyment, but labor, not comfortable repose, but busy unrest, as the proper earthly lot of man; and this has unspeakable importance for him, and upon the whole a most salutary influence on the moral life of the nation...the same zeal, the same parsimony of time, is employed by the minister, the missionary, the colporteur, the tract and bible societies, for higher ends" (Noll 2007, p. 3).

In 1900, two million Christian workers, both Catholic and Protestant, were employed within their home countries, while 62,000 missionaries were sent to foreign countries by 600 mission agencies and denominations, which generated \$200 million of income for foreign missions annually



(Johnson and Zurlo 2018). Mission groups that formed out of this movement inextricably carried their faith's culture alongside their Christian message (Yaremko 1997). In Cuba's context, this meant that North American missionaries at times cared more about personal piety amongst the Cuban adherents, and much less about social justice (Fernández Albán 2015). Often disregarded in current scholarship, however, the interests and needs of people in specific locations challenged and formed local missions (Robert 2008). In a quantitative study of more than 50 countries, sociologist Robert Woodberry found that the presence of what he calls conversionary Protestants made a profound influence on the formation and stabilization of democracies around the world, through the spread of "religious liberty, mass education, mass printing, newspapers, voluntary organizations, and colonial reforms" (Woodberry 2012, p. 244).

A constitutive element of the world mission movement at the turn of the 20th century was its corresponding philanthropy. According to historian Mark Noll, four generalizations characterize the philanthropy of evangelicals. First, evangelicals are generous; throughout history, free-will support has provided for the work of the churches and para-church ministries. Baptists were among the first to base all finances for churches in offerings and collections, mainly to avoid meddling from elites. Voluntary organizations to support Christian causes multiplied the giving levels of evangelicals in particular, and foreign mission groups were among the most popular causes in the mid- to late 1800s. Today, evangelicals are still associated with high levels of giving, mainly because of church involvement, strong belief in the truths of the Bible, and the importance of religion in their lives (Hoge and Noll 2000).

Second, evangelicals adapt readily to the capitalistic culture of the United States. Primarily egalitarian anti-establishmentarians, the mindset of American evangelicals particularly corresponded to a free market system. With only a few exceptions throughout their history, from George Whitefield to Billy Graham, organizational efficiency, and robust and shrewd fundraising has been a constant emphasis (Noll 2007).

Third, evangelicals have promoted generosity in their organizations, even while they simultaneously shy away from discussing economic matters directly. Evangelicals are known for reacting to immediate needs, rather than building widespread theological reasoning about money and developing corresponding institutions, unlike their British counterparts. Popular evangelicals such as Alexander Campbell warned against sophistication with finances and fundraising, citing II Peter 2:2, "and through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandize of you" (Noll 2007).

Finally, these strengths and weaknesses can be explained by the emphasis on personal choice, a highly influential aspect of their foreign missions engagement (2007). "As those who believe in Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord, they tend to focus . . . on specific problems that affect specific people in specific ways. And for those who hold the Bible in high regard, the more clearly the moral cause relates to biblical injunctions, the better. The larger, more complex, and abstract the problem, the less interested they become" (Galli 2006).

Americans and Cubans were also accustomed to distinct charitable environments. The established churches of early American colonies practiced pew rental and glebe lands to support both their pastors and the operating costs of the church, much like in England. After the separation of church and state was guaranteed by the First Amendment, religious and charitable leaders innovated and greatly expanded the sector. Gradually, American evangelicals increasingly encouraged free-will offerings and voluntary pledges. The evolving laws corresponding to charitable gifts in the United States protected and privileged this phenomenon (Noll 2007).

In contrast, Cuban communities had not experienced the religious disestablishment of the United States. As of the late 1800s, many of their associations were operated by elites, with close ties to the Spanish colonial government. Moderately liberal legislation in 1888, however, provided for the blossoming of all types of charitable organizations, including worker's unions and previously outlawed Afro-Cuban societies. White Cubans of Spanish descent were accustomed to the giving traditions of the Catholic community, which provided many of the social services for the island,

including schools and hospitals. Quasi-government groups like the Economic Society of Friends of the Country, provided services like the local newspaper and counsel for economic development. Afro-Cuban traditional associations were both religious and charitable, known as councils and brotherhoods, but were excluded from the mainstream associational life. Afro-Cuban secret societies, once declared illegal and repressed for fear of rebellion, were at last formally recognized in the associational laws of 1888 (Quiroz 2003). As Cuba was a nation of immigrants, mutual benefit societies provided members with much needed social services, as well as entertainment. In the 1840's, groups representing regional interests from Spain—Catalonians, Asturians, Galicians, and Canarians, established such centers (Evans n.d.).

Cuban religious associational life at the time of the Spanish-American War was thus characterized by hierarchical institutions of the government and Catholic church, dominated by elite members, but with a trajectory towards a more liberal democratic civil society. Despite the challenges, the sector was among the most prolific in Latin America at the time. Working-class and Afro-Cuban organizations proliferated, as well as associations that benefited members with Spanish regional interests (Quiroz 2003). Though the country was in a period of fierce contention between governments, races and socio-economic classes, the processes of democracy were beginning to bear fruit. U.S. intervention—militarily, economically, socially, and religiously, helped to leverage this phenomenon to some degree, but the United States was primarily concerned with its own economic and political interests. Religious actors, often genuine in their desire to aid the people of Cuba and share their Christian faith, often operated in a similar fashion to their U.S. secular counterparts. In effect, Ortega describes this period of American evangelization of Cuba as “quick and aggressive” (Ortega 2017).

Cubans were also still bruised from the war, with many experiencing the Platt Amendment as another chapter of white colonizing control. Albán explained the exploitative inheritance dating from early colonial times. Not only were hundreds of indigenous citizens murdered, and natural resources sacked and destroyed, but also “entire systems of community life were restructured and new identities violently assigned.” (Fernández Albán 2015, p. 8). In order to control people and resources, this system created new names like Indians, blacks, mestizos, and mulattos, and new norms about how the groups should interact. Previously, these categories were not considered, or were thought to be unnecessary.

In effect, throughout Latin America in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, groups became both homogenized and marginalized. Over several generations, the European hegemony was cyclically expressed and legitimized, and so it began to self-perpetuate through what Quijano called, “euro-centric perceptions and production of knowledge” (Fernández Albán 2015, p. 8). He further emphasized that “in a large part the very imagination of the people became colonized” (Fernández Albán 2015, p. 8). The dynamic conversation between faith and culture (Ortega 1995) in this context meant modernization, and it resulted in Western missions pouring out resources without questioning whether what was good for North America was good for Cuba (Bosch 1991).

The conflict in the ideologies and methods of U.S.–Cuba religious philanthropy in this era concentrated on two areas. First, missionaries who came with financial support from their denominations required local pastors to raise their salaries with gifts from local congregants. More importantly, Cuban pastors sought administrative roles in the denominations governing their churches. Whereas before 1898, missionaries collaborated with Cuban pastors and lay leaders, especially regarding donations and organizational budgets, after that time, North American missionaries dominated the administration of the religious movement. Cuban Protestant leaders responded to this treatment in a variety of ways. First, they wrote letters of petition. These letters advocated for an increased role in administration within the mission organizations. Other Cuban Protestant leaders left with their congregants and began new churches, independent of the denominations that previously supported them. As pressure increased to make Cuban churches more Cuban, J. Merle Davis authored “The Cuban Church in a Sugar Economy”, which examined more than 400 Protestant congregations. Davis concluded that Protestantism would expand no more, because it was centered in urban locations and based on American

cultural realities. “A middle-class institution has been set up in Cuba in an economic and social order in which the middle-class, as known in America, practically does not exist” (Crahan et al. 2003).

Speaking generally, the North American missionaries who came to Cuba at this time did a great deal to invest in the growth of evangelism and spiritual salvation, and they provided new institutions of education and social welfare. However, they neglected to advocate for structural social change in Cuba at that time. Others state that the Protestants’ focus on personal piety helped address moral ills that were eroding Cuban society such as alcoholism, prostitution, and gambling. Most agree that a Weberian understanding between the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic has profound explanatory power in the case of Cuba (Fernández Albán 2015). Pastor Ortega stated that Cuban churches were indeed daughter churches of the U.S. evangelical movement, a collaboration that he was proud to inherit. He perceives the growth, even with the imperfections, as being consistent with the Christian gospel, that Christians pass on what they also receive (Ortega 2017). Though born out of conflict, these efforts helped to multiply the number of churches in Cuba and to fuel the particularly Cuban religious consciousness (Yaremko 1997).

## 7. Protestant Philanthropy in the Revolution Era

Out of the cradle of independence (Yaremko 1997), Cuba entered into the republican era of its history. Over the ensuing five decades, Cuba’s religious community developed the infrastructure for a dense web of schools, as well as community and student organizations, which was one of the most advanced systems in Latin America, despite erratic periods of control (Quiroz 2003) such as: The Daughters of Mary, The Knights of Columbus, Catholic Action, The Evangelical Social Civic Movement, and the Association of Protestant University Students. Native leadership was consolidated through the creation of two institutions in the 1940s, the Cuban Council of Evangelical Churches, and the Evangelical Theological Seminary (Fernández Albán 2015). They also communicated through a media network that included radio, television, and publications (Pedraza 1999).

In 1952, backed by the United States, the elected official-turned-dictator Fulgencio Batista seized power. In 1959, Fidel Castro and a small guerilla army surprised the world when they overthrew Batista’s government, and within months they had converted Cuba into a Communist nation, seizing American assets such as banks, oil refineries, plantations, and other businesses. Millions emigrated to the U.S. For the remaining citizens, the freedoms of association, speech, and religion were replaced by a socialist vision of ‘el pueblo’—a collective notion of citizens who sacrifice individual desires for the good of the whole (Armony 2003). These ideologies, paired with the Cuba’s intimate relationship with the Soviet Union, put them at odds with the U.S. President John F. Kennedy, who launched an unsuccessful invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. Tensions climaxed with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, considered the closest that the Cold War ever came to full-scale nuclear war.

The Cuban revolution “drastically impacted” religion on the island (Goldenziel 2009, p. 80). At first, many Protestants were captivated by the charismatic leader Fidel Castro and the possibility of a free, just, and egalitarian society (Pedraza 1999). When David Montegro was a young man, for example, his teacher at a Baptist school was a famous member of the July 26th movement. His pastor sold war bonds to his congregation to support the soldiers in the mountains (Montegro 2017).

While still fighting the Revolution, Castro himself had invited a priest to live with the soldiers to baptize, marry, and perform funerals for the soldiers in the mountains. Evangelical members of the movement requested and received their own pastor as well (Montegro 2017). In the later part of 1960, however, criticism over the death penalty, and the expulsion of religious curriculum in public schools, amongst other issues, began to mount, and religious groups came under attack. Then religious programming on radio and television were outlawed, and religious publications that criticized the Communist influence in government were shut down. Corse asserted that “by mid-1960, [Castro’s] denial of Communist influence in the revolution had become hard to sustain, and for many Cuban Protestants, this was an insurmountable problem.” (Corse 2007, p. 25).



The period of euphoria of the Protestants with the Revolution ended when the state officially adopted a Marxist–Leninist ideology on 15 April 1961 (Fernández Albán 2015). Then, in May of 1961, religious schools were taken over by the government to further the government’s goal of creating a “new man”—without the need for religion (Pedraza 1999). Cepeda noted that, “the nationalization of all our schools was a heavy blow”, they were “the bridges we used to reach out to children in our evangelistic zeal, and through them the doors of their homes were opened . . . With the nationalization of the schools, disenchantment became the general rule” (Cepeda 2003, p. 20). Between those two events, the Protestant posture towards the Cuban government changed dramatically.

Fidel Castro’s new government sought to eliminate any viable threats to its power, and thus set as a first priority the restructuring of society’s core institutions (Cepeda 2003). Through an executive order in 1959–1960, he “[had] effectively arrested the autonomy and development of associative organizations” (Quiroz 2003, p. 55). Religious philanthropic organizations were among the first groups to be persecuted in the Communist government, especially churches. “Churches . . . presented the greatest threat to the Revolution due to their extant organizational infrastructures” (Pedraza 1999, p. 17). Confrontation between the church and state appeared quickly after the Revolution. The Catholic religion was most heavily suppressed. Afro-Cuban religions were deemed to be criminal, but because they operated in secret, they were excluded from public discourse. Protestant faiths were both suppressed and co-opted (Goldenziel 2009).

The leaders of the revolution believed that religious groups represented foreign interests. The concerns were not unfounded: the majority of the priests in Cuba were from Spain, and Protestants received strong support and guidance from their U.S. counterparts (Luis 2001). Castro was determined to dismantle the traditional sources of cohesion and redirect allegiances (Pedraza 1999). Similar to when Spain exiled its Cuban-born clergy at the turn of the 19th century, the Revolution’s government officially exiled 130 Catholic priests in 1961, while hundreds of others fled, leaving 200 on the island (Goldenziel 2009). By 1965, 90% of practicing Catholics, mostly elites, had left as well. Fifty percent of the Protestant pastors and lay leaders left as well, including 200 North American missionaries (Luis 2001). This plummet in participation caused a radical diminishing of faith communities, including the closing of the Lutheran church in Cuba, and the near-disappearance of the Jewish community (Goldenziel 2009).

Many of those who left were faithful contributors to the church communities. Because of their wealth and connections, these emigrants had the capacity to relocate, while other, more working-class Cubans, were not so fortunate. Religious philanthropy suffered greatly without these donations; for a while, some continued to contribute, while others abstained in order to not support any aspect of Castro’s regime. Once the U.S. embargo was put into place in 1965, outright philanthropic donations between faith communities in the U.S. and Cuba became temporarily impossible.

The more the government implemented deeper reforms, such as agrarian, urban, and education reforms, the more that “social tensions, class antagonisms, and ideological conflicts” increased. Churches were often in the center of these fierce debates, and they were not prepared to address these profound structural social dilemmas. Protestant congregations struggled with an ever-increasing loss of members, diminishing donations, and loss of major institutional power when their schools were closed (Fernández Albán 2015, p. 44). Because of their organizational capacity, and their upper and middle-class membership, revolutionary authorities made the dismantling of churches a top priority (Pedraza 1999). Individual adherents were forced to choose between their faith and their livelihood. Religious believers were excluded from the Communist Party. In most cases, this meant difficulties in entering a university or in finding employment. Foreign missionaries who stayed faced the threat of persecution and imprisonment (Pedraza 1999). UMAPs, or Military Units to Aid Production, were a web of concentration camps where undesirable citizens were sent. Most often, these undesirables included Catholic priests, and Protestant ministers and seminarians, as well as anyone judged as a deviant. University faculty members and school teachers with religious affiliations were purged from their posts (Pedraza 1999).

Montegro was very careful as a Protestant minister in those days. He traveled to people's homes to encourage them in private. Many times, even a household would be divided. A woman would greet him at the door and welcome him but say, "Careful, pastor, my husband is in the other room, and he is Communist, he's not a believer" (Montegro 2017).

The Catholic Church most openly opposed the government, and from 1959 through 1964, it was deprived of all church properties and schools; Catholics were jailed, and anti-Catholic propaganda was distributed (Goldenziel 2009). Many of these policies were codified into law in the Cuban Constitution of 1975, specifically Article 54, which states "It is illegal and punishable by law to oppose one's faith or religious belief to the Revolution, education or the fulfillment of the duty to work, defend the homeland with arms, show reverence for its symbols and other duties established by the Constitution" (Luis 2001, p. 25).

Protestants, while also threatened by the atheist ideologies and laws, had at least some relationship with the new government. Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists had formed the Cuban Council of Evangelical Churches before the Revolution, and now used the organization to advocate for faith communities and participate in the creation of the new society. The government co-opted the Protestants instead of fully suppressing them, in order to bolster its own legitimacy, garner consensus for its actions, and to further isolate Catholic institutions (Goldenziel 2009). Some saw the position of the Protestants as conciliatory, and as a group they assuredly lost autonomy because of the relationship. However, though the council represented only about half of the Protestant congregations in Cuba, the Protestant community in general had avoided the distrust of the much-estranged Catholics at this point in history (Goldenziel 2009; Luis 2001). This political position allowed them to cooperate with the government in educational and social service provision, both with churches who were part of the council, and with those who were not.

As such, the Protestant community in Cuba was seen as a unified group (Goldenziel 2009), though internally, debates over allegiance to the government or Christ were the consistent focus of contention. By way of adversity, Cuban Protestants at last had the opportunity to advance local leadership and develop a uniquely Cuban theology, instead of depending on the resources and thoughts of the international (mainly North American) community. Pentecostalism, in particular, has flourished in this environment of religious 'cubanismo' (Goldenziel 2009). The practice of diakonia—or charitable giving, also became especially important. Pastors like Montegro, who ministered to people in the Sierra Maestra, for example, had suffered great losses during the war, including the destruction of their homes. Their services always consisted of both teaching and giving, usually of clothing and non-perishable food items as they were available (Montegro 2017).

Protestant religious leaders of the day suffered losses as well. For example, the North American seminaries and denominations who had managed the retirement accounts of Cuban administrators, professors, and pastors could not distribute many of those savings because of the embargo. Cuban theological leaders who had devotedly served the church, retired and passed away in severe poverty before solutions could be brokered (Goodwin 2017). As the years passed, seminary professors and pastors, who were non-government employees and therefore received no social benefits, were supported by the philanthropy of Christian organizations from abroad, mostly North American funds that were funneled through Europe (Ortega 2017). Until the partial opening in 1991, however, this practice remained limited and precarious. Choosing the vocation of a pastor, then, became a commitment to a life of both material poverty and political danger.

For most Protestant believers, faith and philanthropic action in this period became a secret matter. Especially in the early days of the new society, 1960–1975, the Protestant church and its corresponding parachurch organizations were characterized by hibernation. Scholars state that in general, the churches became publicly dormant, although life was still flowing inside. Ongoing religious discrimination made a "doble moralidad"—or double morality, a norm of life (Goodwin 2017). In this double morality, Protestants' public life demonstrated allegiance to Cuba alone, but privately maintained faith traditions amongst family and friends, yet even in those groups it was difficult to know who to trust

(Montegro 2017). Ortega stated that to be seen with a Bible in public or to be caught in group worship at that time was not officially illegal, but nevertheless disparaged (Ortega 2017). Aspiring Protestant university students signed their allegiance to the Communist Party, including a statement of atheism, in order to be able to enroll. At the local level, government groups were known to deny churches access to materials in order to maintain their buildings, even when they had raised the money to do so. Citizens' homes were searched for any evidence of religious adherence; other times, citizens were routinely harassed for their faith. Other Protestant groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, were considered to be counter-revolutionary for their pacifist stance (Luis 2001).

Near the time at Cuban state leaders were writing the new Constitution, however, progressive Catholics throughout Latin America were advancing new expressions of the Christian faith, called liberation theology. These theologians, in their first iteration of the religious thought, did not see a contradiction between Christianity and Marxism. Soon, the Nicaraguan combination of faith and revolution captured the world's attention, and Cuba's political, Catholic, and Protestant leaders adapted these thoughts for their context. Protestant evangelicals created an iteration of the theology as well, calling it 'misión integral' or integral mission (Padilla 2002).

In 1960, the Cuban Council of Evangelical Churches (CCEC) adopted a declaration of principles that illustrated the tension and uncertainty of the Revolutionary times. Those who signed and supported the document were advocating for a Christian social order, one that ascribed to God "the ultimate authority concerning man [*sic*] and history, and that is based upon the social principles of Christ, which postulates the value of the human personality, reverence for life, liberty of the individual, the spirit of service, social justice and the brotherhood of man." (Corse 2007, p. 49). The CCEC was in support of a revolution aimed to reconstruct the society of Cuba, but desired one that was centered in Christ, and not materialistic nor atheistic. Their desire was to affirm the aim of social justice of the Revolution, but to reject the Communist terms and means (Fernández Albán 2015). Cepeda made a similar assessment. "By joining unconditionally a system that challenges religious faith—even if it is only in theory [the leaders of the revolution] limit the tremendous contributions that people with profound Christian convictions and great desire to serve the people in this critical hour of danger and opportunities ... can offer to the revolutionary process" (Fernández Albán 2015, quoting Cepeda, p. 49).

Having lived in the underside of history, Cuban Protestant thought in this time period turned from Eurocentric ideas (Fabella and Torres 1983). Rejecting the Enlightenment's separation between what is human and material, they questioned how one could preach the Christian gospel but leave the poor starving. On the contrary, liberation theology stated that God's first attention and concern is for the poor. For the church to align themselves with God, liberation theology taught that they must demonstrate solidarity with the poor. As Cuban liberation thought developed, the churches rediscovered and affirmed their identity as uniquely Cuban Christians. Cuban Protestants were living in the poverty that Catholic liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez decried, "a subhuman condition" (Gutierrez 1988, p. 164), and that Methodist Míguez-Bonino labeled "a total system of death" (Míguez-Bonino 1980, p. 1155). Out of this reality, the Cuban Protestant tradition viewed social concern as more than a question of ethics. Their notions of philanthropy grew out of the recognition of identification of Jesus with the poor, and in effect, it "was not an ethics question, it was a gospel question" (Bosch 1991, p. 447).

In the same vein, Latin American Protestant philanthropy relied much more on reciprocity versus a one-way flow of gifts from donors to recipients. The Cubans had very few material possessions, which prompted them to reconsider how to use them. The house church movement, currently multiplying in Cuba, was rooted in the late 1970s religious experience. The movement recognized that the poor had something of value to contribute to God's kingdom.

It resisted the notion of development in general, in fact. Having witnessed what happened in other countries, Cubans discussed the "idolatrous character of capitalism" (Fernández Albán 2015, p. 7). For example, items that were previously sold for the value of five sacks of coffee now cost 206 sacks of coffee for the same item (Bosch 1991). At the time, Western Christians were also technological humanists;

they believed that the world's problems could be solved through modern technology. This idea of salvation through technology was pervasive. Even Pope Paul VI stated that "development was the new name for peace" (Bosch 1991, p. 444). Albán claims that Cuba will continue to address "deepening capitalist globalization", which will include both certain accommodations, "while also continuing to resist and to explore alternatives" (Fernández Albán 2015, p. 8).

Ortega also dissents from the technological, humanistic approach to church growth. He emphasized that the advance of the church in Cuba is a work of God, not man. According to Ortega, from the time of the blockade until the moments when, out of extreme poverty and oppression, Cubans began to meet in one another's homes, this movement is not something that anyone could have foreseen or invented. An important and unique factor in the church in Cuba, he states, is their identity as a nation of immigrants. All of the native citizens of Cuba were exterminated in the colonial period, and those that live in Cuba today represent a heterogeneous mix of people from Europe and Africa, primarily, but also from across the world. Some came voluntarily to build businesses, others were forced, and a third group came to Cuba as a refuge. In effect, the character of the Cuban Protestant church reflects an openness to ideas and alternatives, as opposed to dogmatism and structuralism. Ortega is concerned about religious systems that rely on officiants, boards of directors, and bureaucratic hierarchies, stating that they could extinguish the enthusiasm of Cuba's highly diverse and participatory church (Ortega 2017).

## 8. The Special Period and Other Openings

The Cuban church had suffered greatly during revolutionary times, but its suffering was not over. Goldenziel theorizes that politicians want to maintain power, maximize government revenue, promote economic growth, minimize civil unrest, minimize the cost of ruling. In the early days of the revolution, the Cuban government suppressed religion to maintain political power. As the need for the support of the religious community became evident, Fidel made overtures about how the Catholic Church and liberation theology served the common good throughout Latin America. An interview in 1985 with the Brazilian Roman Catholic priest Frei Betto became the widely-read "Fidel and Religion" (Castro 2006). When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and other sources of support in Cuba ran dry, Castro strategically used religion as an outlet for dissent and a humanitarian mechanism to provide for the people (Goldenziel 2009).

Protestantism has strengthened since the 'Special Period' of the 1990s, compared to Catholicism. One reason for this growth is the multiplication of house churches, a Protestant practice to gather and worship in private homes, again made legal in 1991. The government then responded to these "casas cultos" with a new law limiting gatherings to 12 people, with at least two kilometers between each (Goldenziel 2009).

Increased religious liberty also comes with a cost, however. Cuba is aware of U.S. strategies to bolster an independent civil society through religion, including the Roman Catholic leadership in the 1990s and the U.S. State Department's call for more religious involvement in 2004. In response, the Cuban government created the Office of Religious Affairs. Representatives of the office sporadically attend and report on religious meetings in their assigned groups, regulate travel of religious leaders, amongst other controls. A state-sponsored research team also is dedicated to collecting and analyzing data on religious communities on Cuba (Goldenziel 2009).

Pastor Ortega asserts that the Cuban government's key mistake was to not recognize the importance of the spiritual needs of the people. He said it is something that no government program or social assistance can replace. Slowly, the Cuban government is respecting the outreach programs that the Protestant churches provide, if not the spiritual aspect of the churches (Ortega 2017).

On 17 December 2014, another landmark event occurred. President Barack Obama announced the most significant policy change regarding Cuba in more than 50 years, restoring diplomacy between the two countries in a step toward normalizing relations. However, throughout 2015 and 2016, ongoing civil and political rights violations totaled more than 600 documented cases of individuals being jailed

without impunity, many of them Protestant leaders. According to the United States Congressional Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee Chairman Christopher H. Smith, these violations have gotten worse, and have not improved, since the former President's renewed engagement with the island country (Smith 2015).

## 9. Conclusions

Protestant churches in Cuba have developed a double character because of their North American and Latin American influences over time. Beginning as a patriot religion led by native Cubans, the U.S. involvement in the country during and after the Spanish-American War motivated a wave of U.S. evangelical missionaries to come to the island. U.S. evangelicals were known for being generous, yet they did not critically engage with their religious tradition in order to separate spiritual beliefs from political and economic interests. Cubans had been accustomed to the institutional hierarchy of the Catholic faith, and were building an emerging philanthropic sector when the United States intervened. However wrought with problems, the collaboration between the North American and Cuban churches proved influential in the history of both countries.

Through the suffering of the Cuban Revolution, Christians there were liberated from colonial structures, only to take on the yolk of Communism. After a brief period of enchantment, the Protestant church rebuked the government's creation of an atheist state, while still agreeing with their goal of eradicating injustice. Liberation theology, adapted for their context, helped religious leaders to reimagine their faith, independent of Euro-centric traditions.

During the early years of the Revolution, the church went into hibernation, but lived on. North American philanthropy found creative ways to deliver resources to the Cubans, despite the blockade. Religious diakonia characterized the Protestant services of that time, including both teaching and charitable gifts for congregants. Most often, however, Christians met in one another's home, out of fear for the local governments' reactions. Decades later, the house church movement in Cuba is growing rapidly in both numbers and influence. Neither the oppression of the early days of the Revolution, nor the extreme poverty of the 'special period' after the fall of Communism, extinguished the Protestant faith in Cuba. For this reason, Ortega calls the Cuban church "the survivor church" (Ortega 2017).

As Christian transnational interaction accelerates in the age of globalization, and as new institutional forms of the faith emerge, theologians worldwide call for their collaborations to become increasingly reflective. In her book "Sister Churches", Janel Kragt Bakker describes a balance of the local and universal congregations in a "prophetic dialogue" of "continual conversion" (Bakker 2013, p. 29) what Lamin Sanneh dubs the "imperative of partnership" (Noll 2009, p. 197). Cubans and North Americans in particular are entering a new stage of history after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations. Past lessons can provide rich understanding for future movements. Repeated intervention in Cuba's political, economic, social, and religious history have fostered a culture of cubanismo, a robustly independent Cuban people, even as they experience ongoing material misery and are often dependent on external support. This intervention and misery also prompted Cuban Christians to interpret the gospel in a way that emphasizes the value of community and relationships, expect ongoing, miraculous intervention from God, engage in congregational life as an escape from injustice and as a place to recreate social micro-systems, and avoid highly institutionalized forms of social organization.

Justo González states that changing contexts of World Christianity offers believers a lesson that Cuba has already been taught, "the opportunity to learn more of what it means to be a people of faith in circumstances where faith is not supported by society and culture" (González 2002, p. 38). For North American Christians, reflecting on Cuba and North America's shared history may alter their beliefs and practices. Lessons emerge about the effects of aggressive interventionism, advocating for structural justice alongside personal piety, and the mutual enrichment of geographically near but ideological distant neighbors learning again to become trustworthy friends. Future research should



how local and U.S.-based partner churches can serve as institutions that foster social supports, civic engagement, and a peaceful end to ineffective policy.

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